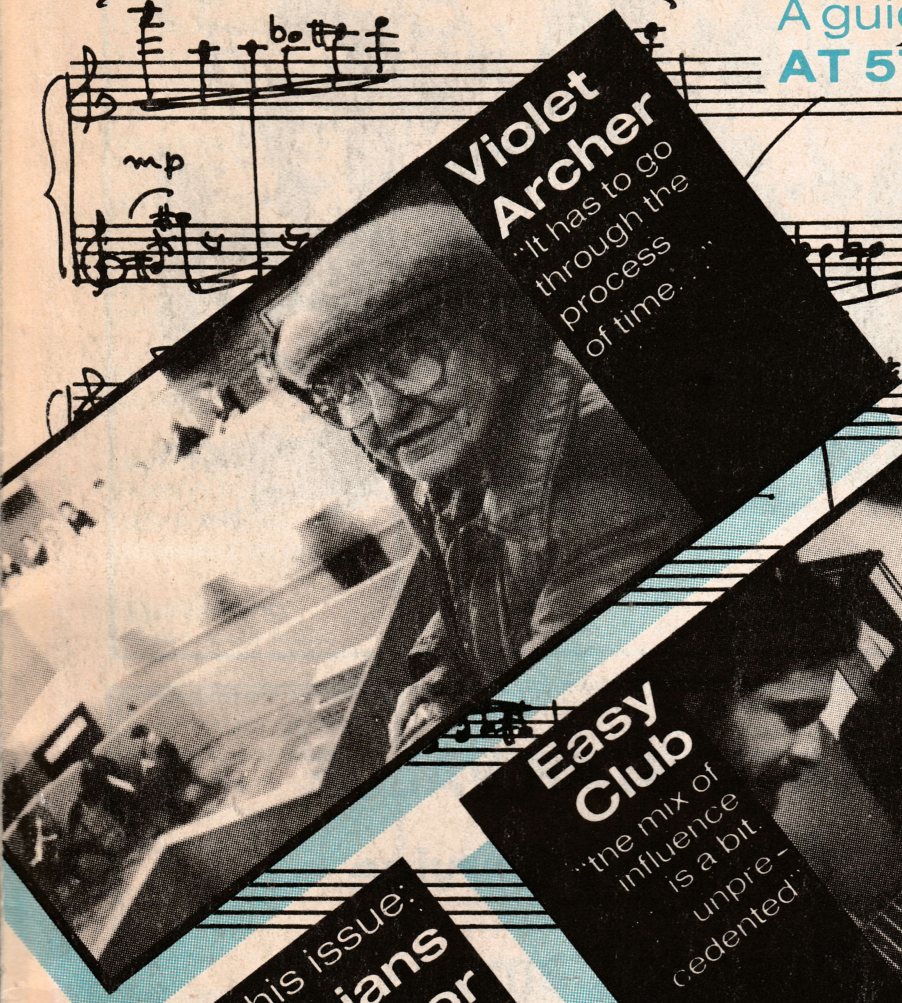
AIRLIGHT

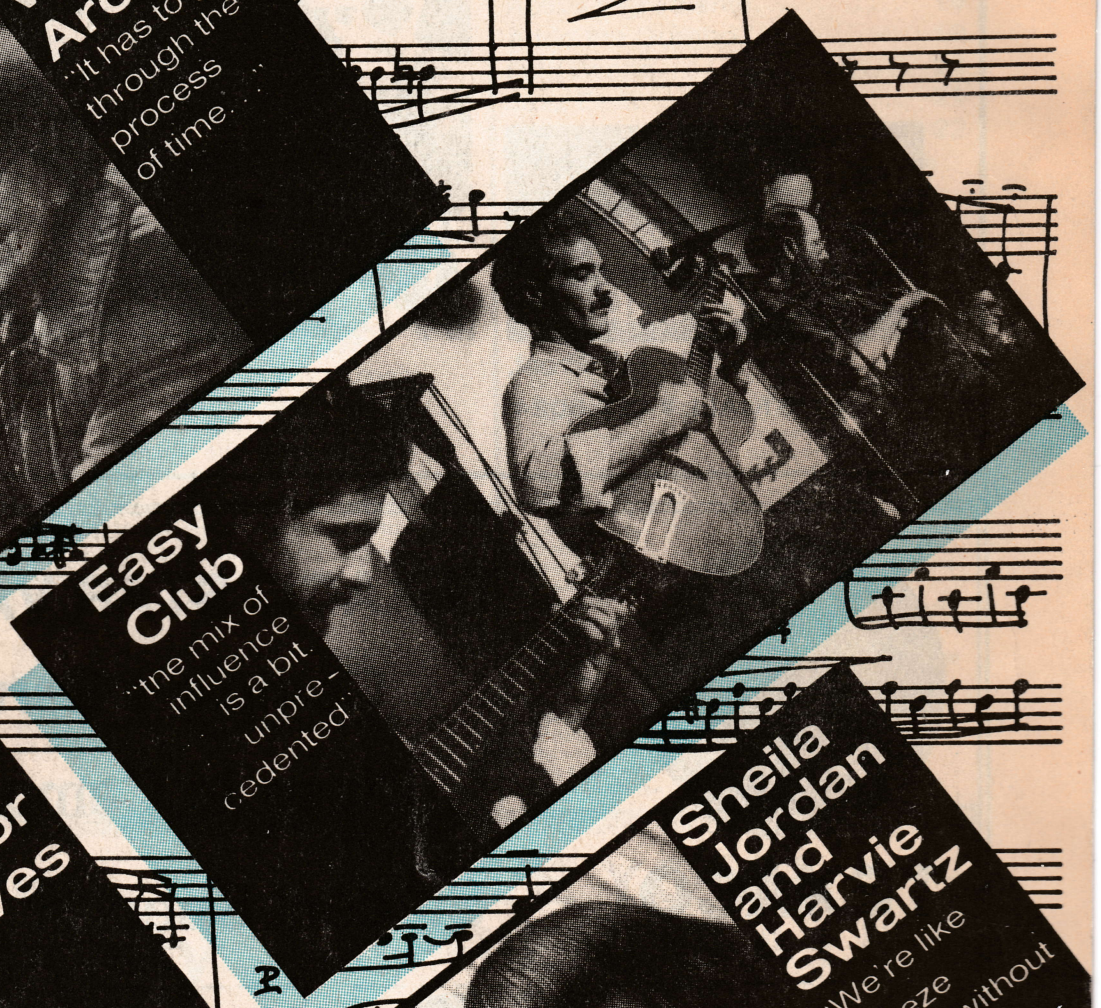
A guide to CJSR 88.5 FM

AT 57/December FREE



Violet Archer

"It has to go through the process of time."



Easy Club

"The mix of influence is a bit unprecedented"

in this issue:

Musicians speak for themselves

Sheila Jordan and Harvie Swartz

"We're like trapeze artists without nets."

Editor
Roger Levesque

Contributors
Michael Anderson
Sir Barone
Michelle Dawson
Jim Doran
J.P. Dusseault
Gene Kosowan
Richard Liukko
Ian McGillis
Ford Pier
Chi Pig
Mike Sinatra

Photos
Bill St. John
Rob Schmidt

Cover Design
Bill St. John

Layout
Kristine Finstad
Debra Macko
Michelle Dawson

Typesetting
Edna Landreville

Omission:
Last month inside photos were shot by
Bill Doskoch
Bill St. John
Rob Schmidt

AIRTIGHT

A Listener's Guide to CJSR ...88.5 FM, 99.1 QC Cable FM and 104.7 Shaw Cable FM

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piece finally. Also other influences of mine have been **Paul Chambers**, **Scott LaFaro**, **Ron Carter**... Those are people that have really inspired my playing. Then also I've done a lot of rock 'n' roll playing and I've been getting into a lot of slap funk on the acoustic bass. . . I do that with Sheila now and it works out very well. Also the way that I play the bass really works out well with the duo because I get to do all the subtle things I've been working on — harmonics — I've been using the bow, and all these things usually don't work when you work with a full rhythm section.

AT: Sheila, you've said 'I love to do free music; I love to do it if there's a direction'. Are there any unexplored avenues in music that you would like to check out?

Sheila: I just did an opera in Austria. I was Queen Guenivere, **Bobby McFerrin** was Merlin, and **Howard Johnson** was King Arthur. It was a television production done in a cave — a really beautiful cave and very, very mysterious. I like that. . . I just want to keep singing and exploring new ideas that happen while I'm singing, but I'm open for anything as long as it has some feeling and some direction. When I say my favorite was of singing is with the bass, that doesn't mean that I don't do other things. I'm a member of the **George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band** which is 18 pieces, and this opera we did was with a symphony orchestra and an 18 piece jazz band. I'd like to experiment with string quartet — maybe something with string quartet and harp...

AT: Do you see the area of jazz vocal music changing at all?

Sheila: Oh, I think it's getting better. A lot more people who sing are becoming interested in jazz singing. I think Bobby (McFerrin) has done a lot to open up that field, especially in Europe, the reason being that they can identify a lot more with sound than they can with lyrics because they have a hang-up with English. They're always interested in scat singing. He (McFerrin) and I both did a workshop over there in Graz, Austria. It was primarily to pick a few of the singers for this opera, because they had some parts and they wanted to use singers and musicians from the conservatory in Graz. I noticed they were much more comfortable when they were doing scat singing then whey they had to use lyrics. More and more I think vocalese type jazz singing is going to become more popular — which it has already. I mean everybody in the world wants to scat sing... but I think that they really have to learn to sing songs and know that whole route before they can get into scat singing, because scat singing is an art in itself.

AT: You are involved in teaching as well. With an art form that depends so much on an individual style of expression how do you approach teaching that kind of thing?

Sheila: I first put them through the standards, and how to talk down tunes, what four-bar and eight-bar intros are, the differences between verse and chorus, and a lot of technical stuff. My class is basically a performance class, but it's also a preparation class to get one ready for going out there and singing, and knowing how to talk about what they want to do with the song. I'd say that the class involves really getting into yourself also. I get them more in touch with their feelings. We work very hard and I've had fantastic results, but you know it doesn't happen overnight. . .

AT: Throughout all the years you have been a professional musician your mainstay has been a day job with an ad agency, and you've expressed strong feelings on your reasons for staying with that before. I'm assuming you would prefer to work on music full-time, but it's a matter of having artistic control. . .

Sheila: That's right. I know when I'm in an office it's not interfering with my artistic endeavors in music. . . I like to keep the music pure so if I have to support the music until it can support me I don't feel too uptight about it. I would like to sing more and I would like to make a living at singing, but until I can do that I don't really feel bitter or cynical. I haven't gotten into feeling sorry for myself about having to work a day job. . . I know when I get a call for a gig to sing somewhere it's because they really like the way I sing or can really identify with it or get a feeling from it and get what I'm trying to give them; and that's love through this music. So that makes me feel really good.

*Twentieth-century Canadian art music is "alternative" by any radio station's classifiation system. In spite of the public's preconceptions, Violet Archer's music is performed, broadcast and recorded frequently both in this country and abroad. Born in Montreal in 1913, Archer began composing when she was sixteen. While she was an undergraduate at McGill University, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra premiered her "Scherzo Sinfonico". Throughout the 1940s she was performing as a percussionist with the Montreal Women's Symphony as well as writing music, teaching and accompanying. During the summer of 1942 she studied composition with **Bela Bartok**, a major figure in twentieth-century Western music. In his last lesson with her, Bartok said, "Do not be too influenced in whether you should write in this style or that style, in other words, don't feel that you have to write avant garde music or that you have to be a serial composer or that you have to be a modal composer. Instead, follow your own intuition in the way that you want to express yourself." At the end of that decade Archer was learning more about the art of composition at Yale University with the German composer **Paul Hindemith**.*

*From 1950 to 1961, Violet Archer taught composition in universities in the United States. While at the University of Oklahoma, she produced radio documentaries on twentieth-century composers, including ones on **Charles Ives** and **Edgar Varese**. Since 1962 she has made Edmonton her home, teaching in the Department of Music at the University of Alberta, where she now holds the title of Professor Emerita.*

In 1984 she became the first woman to have a commissioned work performed at the International Choral and Folk Dance Festival in Cork, Ireland; she was also awarded the Order of Canada and declared Composer of the Year. This year in October, the "Violet Archer Festival' marked the first time a music festival was devoted to a Canadian composer.

Dr. Archer draws upon material sources as diverse as the Bible, John Donne, Dorothy Livesay and Nova Scotian and Inuit folk songs, though most of her music comes from personal inspiration. She composes in various formats including opera, film, electronic and chamber music. In conversation with her, I found her to be in the fortunate position of having more projects and interests than time to pursue them all, and deeply committed to tne promotion of new music.

AT: First of all I would like to talk a bit about your compositional studies with **Bela Bartok**. How did that come about?

VA: I remember the first time I tried to go to his home. He lived in the Bronx in one of these houses that we would call duplexes. I got lost. I got incredibly lost in the city of New York. I had never been away from Montreal, so I ended up at the end of the subway line in a cemetery; I was absolutely startled, desperate, so I didn't know what to do. Anyway, I telephoned. . . I did get there the next day. Right away he was interested to find out more about my background and he asked me various pertinent questions as to my musical background. One of them which I remember so vividly as 'do you know the symphonies of Haydn?' And of course I so anxious to please him that I said 'yes, I do'. He spoke to me very quietly and he said 'how fortunate you are that you know them so well; all my life I have been studying them and still I do not know them'. So I felt that I should crawl under the chair that I was sitting on (laughs). But it was a good lesson for me. . . it made me think of how much there is to learn. What he started me doing was to harmonize Hungarian folk melodies. He would dictate them to me, he would play and I would take them down, and he would say "well, let's do this one for string quartet, or say, for clarinet and string quartet, or for four voices. . . different combinations. I learned a tremendous amount from that because I did not know Hungarian folk songs you see. The only contact I had had was with a book of his folk influences. Of course I was very taken with all this. . . I found it very difficult because it involved knowing how to read into those melodies the proper harmonization which were more based on modal harmony than on the regular major/minor kind.

AT: Probably the Canadian folk songs which you had come in contact with were bascially tonal melodies. . .

VA: But I have not really done much with Canadian folk songs at that time. It was after that that I became quite involved in taking Canadian folk songs and applying what I had learned from Bela Bartok to these folk melodies which

Violet Archer

Insights Into the Thoughts of a Composer

Interview by Ian Young

were indeed based quite a lot on modes. . . the French Canadian ones, the Nova Scotian ones, the Newfoundland ones. Of course we can't count in that the songs of the Inuit of the Indians because they have their own tonal system. But anyway, it taught me so much which became much more reinforced afterwords when I studied with Paul Hindemith. With Mr. Bartok, as we went on that summer after doing the folk songs, he assigned me to make up a tune of my own, and to write a set of variations upon it for string quartet. So that was my major project for Bela Bartok, and it's one of the most important twentieth century techniques — the art of variation. It taught me so much about what I do even at present. . . treating your material as though you were doing perpetual variations of maybe a tune of your own, or borrowed from some other composer, or maybe even little germ ideas. That's the way he wrote, you see. It's fascinating when you study Bartok's work — you realize how economical he was - and this is what he put across to me then.

AT: It sounds like Bartok must have been a very good teacher and yet he wasn't particularly interested in having composition students. I understand he taught piano in Hungary. . .

VA: Well you see in Europe he was mainly known as a virtuoso pianist, and it was outside of his own country that he became acknowledged [as a composer]. His works were considered controversial. . .

AT: Despite the fact that they containted Hungarian folk melodies as their thematic material . . .

VA: Oh yes, because you see he was a real patriot, he loved his country so much so he took up subjects like Kossuth who was a Hungarian political hero. . . also some of the subjects that he chose for a ballet which brought out sort of the seamy side of life were regarded as not suitable. So he had a difficult timein his own country.

AT: You also give very high praise for **Paul Hindemith**'s pedagogical technique.

VA: Yes I do give high praise to Paul Hindemith as well. For one thing, he believed that you have to go down to the roots of whatever major study you are doing in music be it composition, theory, harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, whatever. So he was very strong on starting right from the very beginning of things, knowing how to deal with the simplest possible elements of music, and yet not to be influenced in one's particular idiom by the old masters. However this did not mean that he thought we should not respect the old masters and know them. In fact he was an expert on medieval music and it was one of our requirements to sing in the college musicum. . . so that we would know the medieval and renaissance music. But when it came to doing our own individual work as composers he felt that we should start with the simplest possible ideas which were removed from the tonality of say the use of the major and minor scale. . . away from that, so that we became involved in finding tonal centres of our own. . . not necessarily atonal — without a tonality completely — it could be partially atonal, but it would more from one tonal center to another. . .

AT: So it was kind of a compromise between the twelve-tone composition of **Schoenberg** and the tonality of classical composers?

VA: Right.

AT: Of all the composition teachers that you have studied with who do you think influenced you most profoundly?

VA: I feel that I owe so much to my teachers. **Claude Champagne** of course was more influenced by French composers having been a graduate of th Paris Conservatoire, and he was a stickler for fundamentals and made us study a great deal of the traditional literature. Then my next step was to study for a short time with the Dean of music at McGill, **Douglas Clarke**, who was a complete believer that you should just learn by studying scores of twentieth-century composers. He had a wonderful library of scores and he would lend them to me. He would say "now what would you like to do next? Would you like to write an overture?" And I would say of course, I would love to write an overture, and especially for orchestra because I adored the orchestra. So there I had free reign, he didn't restrict me in any way and I needed to be restricted. So the restrictions I got from Bartok were very salutory for my musical health as a composer, if I may put it that way. I think the composer who had the most influence on me was really Paul Hindemith in the way that he gave me — not just me but all of his students — the concept of seeing the architecture, and trying to see as much as possible in one's imagination — aural imagination — the structure of what one would composer. So that if I chose to compose a sonata I would immediately have to think of myself all right, how many movements am I going to have, for whom am I writing this — the capability of the performer, the length of the piece,. . . would it be in a great big concert hall or an intimate surrounding because of the sound. . . it would make a difference you see. And also the architecture of each movement should be conceived in one's mind. . . to have a general structure just like an architect puts up a building, you don't see all the bricks and mortar right away. . . you see the plan of it. He [Hindemith] had it in his mind. . . the vision, you see, of what he wanted to do. This may seem old-fashioned but it really isn't because when you think of sculptors, painters, artists in these areas, like Michaelangelo who, when he saw a block of marble he had a vision of what was inside of that block of marble and he started to hack away at it a little at a time 'til finally it emerged. . . . Of course he was a genius, but it's very much in the same concept of working with a musical idea.

AT: How in general do you regard the relationship between contemporary composers and the fact that there are tapes and records available for documenting performances of music today as there were not in the time of Beethoven and Schubert?

VA: Well I can say that it certainly has widened the circle of listeners to music, right from when the victrola first came out and operas be could be recorded on them. . . I would say that there is a greater listening audience for the traditional side of music than there is for the contemporary. There is so much more recording of the traditional music even now when we are nearing the twenty-first century, and I'm not saying this in a disparaging sense. It's just that you get the feeling that this is never going to end and when are we going to put on an equal basis the music of our century. .

AT: Have you considered working in an electronic medium again.

VA: Well, I often consider it but I find I'm so involved in so many projects and I keep saying now at the end of this I want to take some time. . . I'm very fortunate in this respect that no sooner have I finished or nearly finished something and something else comes up, so I have been taken away from it. But what I would really like to do is get back and take

some time and to work with it and to write a piece which wold be a combination of instruments and tape.

AT: Those are difficult things to do because you have to have the orchestra exactly timed with the tape.

VA: That's right but, I find that very challenging, and I like to be challenged.

AT: I would like to ask about your reaction to listening to recordings of your music. When you listen to a piece does it remind you of incidents that were happending at the time that you were writing it? Does it bring back feelings and emotions of that time? For example *Sinfonietta*. . .

VA: Well, when I heard it, it was a premier, it was quite exciting and I was going through every note of it. . . When you hear it in a recording which you know is supposed to be faultless, then you don't get so excited over it.

AT: You have talked about the difficulties of Canadian composers and contemporary composers, but it must have been particularly difficult — and perhaps it still is — being a female composer in what is perhaps almost exclusively a male environment.

VA; Well I don't know. . . I don't really give that too much thought. I feel that if one has strong convictions one doesn't spend too much time worrying over the fact that one should be a man or a woman. . . I feel that if you approach people in good faith making them feel that yes, you have got something to show them, other than saying 'well please excuse me, I'm not a man and could you please look at this' . . . I don't think that it's such a big obstacle. . .

AT: Let's suppose that you could have been born in another time period. Do you sometimes wish that you could have been born in the middle ages of in the baroque period, say?

VA: All right, I think I can say that. . . I think I would have enjoyed it because they were so daring in that period. I don't know that I would want to have been born in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Except for what I was doing in harmony and counterpoint — my basic studies — where I tried to excell in learning the technique of the old masters, but when I wrote my own music I never wanted to write that kind of music, that style of music. I've never really wanted to write music of the past except in an exercise which was fun to do. To do something in the sytle of Mozart, in the style of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, etc. . . . I remember doing that just for fun, doing a set of variations on the birthday theme, you know 'happy birthday to you'.

AT: You've talked about the fact that the recording industry generally supports pre-twentieth-century music or at least pre-World War II music, but that there isn't a great deal of support for post-World War II music either on records or in the concert hall. Do you have any ideas as to why there is this antipathy?

VA: Well there are two sides to it. Inasmuch as so little is heard the general public. . . it doesn't make an impact on them. The fact is that when they hear it it doesn't do what Mozart does because when you hear the music of Bach, Mozart, etc. — all the old masters — you can almost anticipate what the next little bit that comes will be. . . So that there is a continuity in the ear which retains what is heard and anticipates what comes and so therefore it can be followed. But in this newer music of the post-war era the public listening audience becomes disturbed because, one, they do not hear it enough and secondly, when they do hear it the listening process is that they cannot remember or retain what is being heard as it comes, therefore they cannot anticipate what should be coming, therefore they get lost. If they heard it more then a sort of listening pattern would be formed in the imagination, and we are so near the end of the century that I find it appalling that we are having so many problems. Another angle is that. . . Schoenberg for instance is played not really much at all, not even by the best orchestras, or say Stockhausen, to go further than Schoenberg. . . Stockhausen, Boulez. . . With community orchestras they would require so many more rehearsals and usually they don't have the funds to pay for those rehearsals, because they're paying union rates. The symphony has to pay those union rates which or course from the point-of-view of the performer in the symphony it's quite just that they should be paid, but on the other hand it creates this problem. Now the older symphonies like the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. . . they may indulge themselves a little bit more but they don't do that much of Schoenberg, Webern, Stockhausen, Boulez, Messiaen, all of these. . . they don't that much. . . so that they require to add to the orchestra — it costs them so much more — so that we have the problem that there are not sufficient strengths to balance all of thise extra wind and brass, and percussion, so that there are really I would say mechanical problems. It certainly has some bearing on the problem. Another side to that problem is that the management of any orchestra is concerned about not getting in the red every year and having a big deficit. . . They're so worried in case they lose their subscribers.

AT: You were talking about predictability in the music of the old masters and that one can usually anticipate what is coming. . . The same could be said I suppose of popular music today. There is the presence of the repetitive beat. . .

Violet Archer — A Discography

Three Sketches For Orchestra	Radio-Canada SM 119
Sinfonetta	Radio Canada SM 226
Episodes (for electronic tape)	Melbourne SMLp 4024
Northern Landscape	Centredisc* 1083
Caleidiscopio	Centrediscs 1183
Theme and Variations	Cetrediscs 1684
Anthology of Canadian Music (7-record set)	Radio Canada ACM 17

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VA: Yes, that's the strongest part of the popular music — it's primitive quality, the particular quality of repetition. . . you know, banging away on it, and I say banging not because I mean to be disparaging but because they want it loud. I'd like to make a study of that if only I had time, of the reason why it has to be at such an intense pitch as if it's being looked upon as a kind of drug. It creates a certain state of mind. . . the listeners get into a sort of trance. Well of course punk rock is not really the latest thing anymore, there is something else which has come along and replaced it. . . and those singers. . . you can see that they get into an emotional state when they're singing, and I'm wondering if that's a part of it. . . forgetting the realities of the world.

AT: But don't you think classical music as well can place one into an emotional state?

VA: As well, you're right, I wanted to add that, of course classical music can take us away from reality and make us feel as if we're in a different world.

AT: Your music is somewhat different than Stockhausen's and Penderecki's in that it is accessible in terms of technical level in many cases, not in all cases. Are you consiously doing that in your writing — attempting to reverse the direction away from accessibility that contemporary music has taken?

VA: Oh, I don't know. . . It just depends what I'm working on. There are pieces like the Sinfonietta which was written for a community orchestra and I had to use three trumpets just because there were three trumpets instead of two. You see usually it's four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba. . . and it was a community orchestra and I had some idea of their capabilities, therefore I stayed with the concept. If I wrote something that they couldn't learn in very few rehearsals it would just never be played, they would just give it up. But if I'm writing for, as I'm in the process of doing, a concerto for two pianos and orchestra commissioned by the CBC which will be performed [by the Edmonton Symphony] in the spring of 1987, I feel that I can go further and not be as concered about the fact that there may not be enough rehearsals because our orchestra is quite good. It's just that it's not a large orchestra at present, it just can't afford it, but it does get good results. For my piece I will be allowed the full brass and extra percussion if I need it, and that makes it all right, you see. One has to think of ways and means of getting around these problems. In my second opera I used a very small orchestra. For instance, I had one flute, one oboe, one clarinet, one bassoon, making it possible for the flute to play piccolo, and the clarinet to play bass clarinet if needed. In brass I had only one horn, one trumpet, ne trombone. However, I had several percussionists, and I had a problem with that because I was almost threatened that they would have to take out one of the percussionists and I said this simply cannot be because that's the way it is. Anyway the committee who was running the festival decided to do something about it. . . But you see I was purposely using that small group because if I had to use the same kind of an orchestra as would be used by **Strauss** in the *Rosenkavelier* or *Elektra*. . . my opera would never have been produced, it just wouldn't happen.

AT: I suppose in Strauss' time there was greater support for his music. Are you pessimistic then of the future of western classcial music?

VA: I'm not exactly pessimistic. I'm terribly concerned and trying very hard to support it in every possible way. . . for the music of this century. I think that it needs as much publicity as possible, because if we don't do that then indeed I could feel vert pessimistic about it. We are just creeping along very slowly and we are ahead of where we were in the first part of the century but there is such a long way to go yet.

AT: You've been particularly interested in the music of the Copper Eskimos in northern Canada and you have written a couple of compositions based on it. How did your interest in that group of people come about?

VA: Since many, many years ago I have been very interested in what folk music there is in our country. It goes way back to when I was living in Montreal and I became familiar with the folk muisc of Quebec; I possess in my library quite a lot of this material which I bought as I went along. . . I was very interested in the music of Quebec and of Nova Scotia and of Ontario. At the same time I came across a very interesting book of music of Eskimos of the Coppermine river, north of Alberta. They call themselves Inuit by they were still being called Eskimos when that book was printed in 1925. . . And I've looked at other collections, and I've looked at collections of music of the Indians of the west coast, particularly the Tsimshian Indians. I've gone through this repertoire and I've found that it is so different from the other music of any of the ehtnic people that are living in Canada. . . the native music is so different and I find it quite fascinating because if one exerts one's imagination one can really make use of it as a basis and I used one weather incantation of the Inuit of the Coppermine river, and I named it after the person who had sung it to these people, Ekbokwok. It's a short piece, only seven and a half minutes long, but appraently it went over very well where it was premiered on an occasion at McGill University. I used one of the Tsimshian Indians, pieces in one movement of a work for piano and strings which will be premiered in 1986. I called it *Incantations*. The name of the tune is *In the Valley*. . . one things not only of the melodic aspect but also of the rhythmic aspect of the surroundings where these songs were sung, and I'm very fascinated by that. I've been a member of the **Canadian Folk Music Society** since it was founded but around 1964 I was invited to be on the executive of the society and to be there representing Alberta and its folk music. Very litte has been done in Alberta in collecting its own folk music. They asked me to set up a plan for doing research in Alberta. I know that there are sixty-five Indian and Metis reservations just in our province. Then there are *so* many ethnic groups, interesting ones, like the ones between Edmonton and Rimby, where there are settlements of Norwegian and Scottish people —and you would get the combination of these two cultures. And of course, around St. Paul and Fahler and all that area there's a good deal of the French Canadians from when they migrated away back to those places. . . and there is so much to be done! My concern is that. . . well, pretty soon there won't be anybody left who remembers all this. . . I was offered a contract to go out and do some of this research but I had to refuse it becaue I was teaching full time. . . I haven't heard of anybody just now doing anything.

AT: Do you think your interest in folk came about as a result of your study with Bartok and his interest in traditional fok music?

VA: Partially, yes. He succeeded in creating a style of his own. You can't say that he is quoting this folk song or that folk song in his music; he just absorbed the characteristics and they became part of his style. Of course the English composer **Ralph Vaughan Williams** did something similar. . .

AT: If you were for some strange reason, banished to a desert island, and you could take a phonograph with you, and any five discs, which ones would they be?

VA: Well the ones I would think of just now - though I might certainly changed my mind later — would be Bartok's 5th string quartet, Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor which is a very great work. . .

AT: . . . one of his last string quartets. . .

VA: Yes, and Bartok was the continuaton as far as I'm concerned in quartet writing. . . the **Bach** *Goldberg variations*, played by **Glenn Gould** of course, I would take the second recording. . . The *St. Luke Passion* of **Penderecki**. . . and the *Turangalila Symphony* of **Messiaen** — it's a very great work, there's so much in it, a fantastically orchestrated piece. . . I migth change my mind. . .

AT: There has to be a settling-in time. There is a certain novelty I suppose in the music of Philip Glass and son on. People are embracing it but the question is whether in forty years it will still be considered great music.

VA: That's a fact. It has to go through the process of time. Time will decide these things. It has already decided it for certain composers. Bartok is a composer who will last into the next century. Even though he embraced so much the quality, the aura of his native country, there is something absolutely deep-rooted in it that can interest anybody.